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# Gender and the politics of war historiography in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*

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## Abstract

Buchi Emecheta's novel about the Nigerian Civil War, *Destination Biafra* (1982), challenges war historiography in ways that scholarship designating it a “female perspective” on the conflict can sometimes overlook. This article focuses on how Emecheta deploys a dual narrative approach that weaves an omniscient narrator with diverse Nigerian women's points of view in order to position their lived experiences and subjective knowledges as collectively amounting to the definitive history of the Civil War. This draws the reader's attention to the gendered effects of the civil war as the lens whereby which all facets of the war can be understood - even and especially its macro causes in neocolonialism and petrocapiatalism. By writing women who know the economic imperatives behind the conflict; exercise agency under dangerous circumstances; and employ methods of survival that safeguard others, Emecheta reveals the gendered politics of war historiography, and tests these politics by collapsing distinctions between what is habitually conceived of as the war front (and therefore to be narrated by active combatants), and everywhere else (to be narrated by witnesses, refugees, or survivors). *Destination* can therefore be understood as an attempt to intervene directly in historiographical method, as it rejects the designation of women's war experiences as mere addenda and questions gendered expectations of where to look for and find historical truths.

## Keywords

African feminisms, African women's writing, Buchi Emecheta, Nigerian Civil War, Nigerian literature, postcolonial studies

“Working and achieving to great heights is nothing new to the woman of Africa [ ... ] This does not mean that she becomes a successful international lawyer, a writer or a doctor, although African women in these professions are doing very well. But for the

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majority of African women, her real achievement — as I see it — is to make her immediate environment as happy as is possible under the circumstances” (Emecheta, 1988: 179). In this speech delivered at the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, the Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta admires what she describes as African women’s skills in managing difficult material conditions to the benefit of the individual and the collective. She argues work deemed successful by Western feminism is easy in comparison to the complexity of surviving the diverse structures seeking to socially, politically, and economically delimit the lives of African women.<sup>1</sup> This power, she further suggests, is passed on, practised, and known (“nothing new”), and it results in material changes to “the circumstances” (Emecheta, 1988: 179).

In her 1982 novel *Destination Biafra*, this everyday (re)creation of sustenance, sanity, and community out of systematized scarcity unfolds through the representation of a sustained and complex relationship between subjective wellbeing and collective resilience in the midst of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). That nation-states create altogether or choose to perpetuate certain narratives of history at the exclusion of others in order to justify their existence is no novel argument, but it is important to recall that “the rather sparse official commemoration of the Nigerian Civil War has been left mainly to the military, which uses the opportunity to assure itself of its role as guarantor of national unity” (Simola, 2000: 98). Fiction and memoir about the war has therefore been praised as providing alternatives to this official military historiography. For Craig McLuckie, the memoirs of Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyinka, and Ken Saro-Wiwa “challenge received notions” through “depicting the effect [the Nigerian Civil War] had in real terms: human and subjective” (2001: 21), while for Ogaga Okuyade, poetry about the war is similarly to be lauded for “remaining focused on the widening circles of pain radiating from loss” (2012: 28). In these examples and more, choosing to depict the subjective experience of war as it was felt by civilians becomes all the more political in itself, due to the temporal proximity of many Nigerian writers to the events narrated. Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka broached the subject of the Civil War almost immediately after it ended, for example, and others like Flora Nwapa and Cyprian Ekwensi did so not long afterwards.

While Emecheta’s *Destination* sits within this corpus, it is singular for the ways in which it seeks to gender this idea of subjective experience as an intervention in war historiography. Examining Emecheta’s use of both an omniscient voice and partial character points of view, I propose that this undertaking must be read beyond the idea of an addendum to existing literary responses to the Nigerian Civil War through the provision of a missing “female perspective”. This is a term, as Polo B. Moji has noted (2014), often found in Emecheta scholarship (Okuyade, 2010; Machiko, 2008; Nnaemeka, 1997; Nwahunanya, 1991) without satisfactory definition. In calling Emecheta’s centring of women’s subjective war experiences a historiographical intervention, I seek to move beyond the surface observation the term implies — that *Destination* counters masculinist historiographies of the Civil War simply by virtue of the gender of its author or by its quantity of female characters — and out towards the broader intervention Emecheta makes about *who* we turn to for narrating *what* components of history.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay describes how, in “sealing certain deeds and actions in the past, imperial power secludes people, modes of life, and forms of action from themselves” (2019: 585); she is referring to the practices that imperialism not only destroys but

disavows having destroyed, by stamping that which it destroyed as having already been ineffectual, primitive, or dying. In bringing women's "modes of life and forms of action" (Azoulay, 2019: 585) to bear on a story about a neocolonial war, *Destination's* intervention is not so much the presentation of some ontologically and socially singular "female perspective" (Machiko, 2008: 61), but rather an account of diverse women whose knowledges — and practices of resilience under variously patriarchal and (neo)colonial conditions — cannot be "sealed" into the past, because they remain effective means of resistance in the present. "In order to raise female subjects into twentieth-century Igbo history, Emecheta extracts a lexis of significant metaphors or defining images from [her] subjects' lives — images which, in each case, arise specifically from their day-to-day realities", Elleke Boehmer argues (2005: 115). Here, Boehmer draws attention to how Emecheta often uses the symbolic - "significant metaphors or defining images" — in a manner that is interwoven with her more descriptive narration ("day-to-day realities"). This, alongside other representational moves that will be discussed, situates women who lived through the Nigerian Civil War as active subjects of that history. Their subjective experiences of the war (represented especially through testimony and point of view narration) are sources of insight throughout the novel into those dimensions of the Civil War customarily thought of as the realm of objective facts, such as its geopolitics. As such, Emecheta's novel treats the structural workings of neocolonialism and petrocapiatalism in wartime Nigeria as *known* to Nigerian women - and met by them in various ways that enable them to resist and survive their power.

*Destination* sets itself a two-fold representational task towards the above ends. One contextualizes the war within its wider geopolitical stakes (confirming especially its neocolonial character) through a mixture of dialogue between female characters with limited or localized knowledge, and general information delivered in third-person omniscient narration, which takes the reader chronologically through events occurring across and beyond Nigeria. The former device prioritizes the observations of women experiencing the conflict, as they identify the war as neocolonial in character. The latter device, third-person narration, reveals pre- and intra-war political and economic developments to the reader, many of which confirm the predictions and interpretations of events offered by the novel's female characters. In the first part of this discussion, I will examine this interplay via moments in the novel where the neocolonial resource scramble that undergirds the Civil War is confirmed both through omniscient narration, and through Emecheta's women, who demonstrate their subjective knowledge of this based on their own lived experiences.

The novel's other representational pursuit is that of affirming the creative coping abilities of, and the intergenerational memory of resistance amongst, "African women", in Emecheta's terminology (1982/1994; 1988), wherein "alternative terms of political affiliation" (Boehmer, 2005: 15) with and beyond nationhood can be discerned. Sexual violence, refugeedom, the loss of children, the destruction of crops: all target things that reassure the very subjectivities of *Destination's* women, who are often at one and the same time producers, workers, carers, mothers, sisters, cultivators, traders, healers, teachers, and sexual assault survivors. Considering those moments where women bear witness, negotiate safety, and invoke the maternal (in senses including but beyond biological motherhood) to gain some degree of control in dangerous situations, in the

second part of this article I will explore how women's resilience in *Destination* manifests sometimes as organized resistance, and always as the collectivization of the material and psychic burdens of war. This means not only the restoration of some agency over their lives but also (as Emecheta's protagonist sets out to do in the end) the telling of women's stories — the full story — of the war.

## "Was not the oil the reason for all this mess in the first place?"

*Destination's* exposé of foreign involvement in the Civil War involves situating the war as, amongst other things, marking a clash of neocolonial interests in West Africa in the 1960s. This is not a new concern for Nigerian Civil War literature; however, it is notable for its different execution and purpose in Emecheta's novel. As the novel recounts the war's many political and military manoeuvres in omniscient third-person narration, its linear but diachronic timeline also follows protagonist Debbie Ogedemgbe's journey from Lagos to the East, disguised as one of thousands of Igbo refugees heading in the same direction (she, however, is on a doomed mission to broker peace with Biafra's Colonel Chijioke Abosi). To present the Civil War as neocolonial in character, *Destination* begins by establishing that independence was nominal, illustrating a combination of two colonial attitudes that shaped British rule in the early 1950s. The opening scene is particularly demonstrative here as it involves a conversation between the last British Governor-General of Nigeria, MacDonald (Emecheta's fictional counterpart to the real one, Sir James Wilson Robertson); a colonial statesman, Sir Fergus; and his officer son, Alan Grey. Emecheta here demonstrates two related kinds of imperialist attitude as driving British strategy around Nigerian independence. Sir Fergus equates colonial subjects with children: "These people haven't even been given that paper yet and they behave as if they already own the whole world" (Emecheta, 1982/1994: 7).<sup>2</sup> The youngest man in the room, Alan, echoes the older man's infantilization, but in seeing Nigeria as *terra nullius* represents another kind of imperialist ambition. For Alan, who is altogether uninterested in whether Nigerians are deferential enough to the British colonial officer class of Sir Fergus, the issue at hand is that the British cannot leave the Hausa's mineral wealth and the Igbo's oil untapped: "Now we are to hand it over to these people, who've had all these minerals since Adam and not known what to do with them" he reminds his superiors (1982/1994: 8).

With the merely formal nature of independence established, the novel then adds subjective impressions from various women, who confirm the extractive petrocapi-talism at the heart of the conflict. In turning for geopolitical information to Nigerian women who are absent from the decision-making itself, but subject to and conscious of the lived effects of these decisions, Emecheta takes a theme present in the work of her contemporaries — that of neocolonialism — and makes it work harder, getting the reader to think about where they expect to find this evidence and the potentially gendered nature of that expectation. Via third-person narration, Emecheta first communicates the stakes of the capitalist world-system in a one and entire Nigeria, which must ensure Nigeria's continued function as a petrocolony — now adjusted according to the post-independence structures of exploitation and accumulation in West Africa, as

Chibuiké Uche (2008) and Chima Korieh (2012) have discussed. This stake is then confirmed as known to *Destination's* women, through scenes that prioritize their interpretations of where the war sits within Nigeria's geopolitical and historical contexts. Debbie, the daughter of the inaugural finance minister later assassinated in the 1966 coup, draws attention to how post-independence leaders have little agency over their "resource curse", in that their own positions of power are only secure inasmuch as they entertain the economic interests of Europe and the US: "I don't think Abosi's move is as stupid as it looks. You know what Momoh did — he divided the country into twelve. Not only that, he made sure that through the way it was divided that the richest oil wells in the East fall into the hands of the non-Igbo-speaking people. In other words, he declared war" (115). This moment delivers the reader some important geopolitical information even as it also illustrates one of the problems with character point-of-view narration. Debbie's focus on the devolution of power away from "Igbo-speaking-people" nods to the highly politicized question of ethnicity after colonial rule, which is related to conditions that have since contributed to the dominance of the Igbo as the majority ethnic group in East and South-East Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> As Hugh Hodges notes, Debbie seems largely unconscious of the way in which Nigeria's minorities experienced the secession and the war: indeed, the Ogoni, the Ijaw, the Ikwere, and many other small ethnic groups in the Niger Delta suffered attacks from both sides (2009: 5).

Another character provides a clear analysis of the economic incentives behind the conflict. During the harrowing lorry journey east that Debbie undertakes with a group of Igbo women whose husbands are gunned down on the road, she meets Mrs Maduko, a "bold old woman who because of her age and fearlessness was becoming their leader" (Emecheta 1982/1994: 177). Mrs Maduko challenges Debbie's naïve suggestion that Colonel Abosi will surrender rather than let Biafrans starve: "You don't know our people. Do you think those at the top will starve? No, they are probably there drinking champagne. And as for the businessmen, they don't want this war to end. You see that driver who brought us to the Benin-Agbor road? Well, he used to be an ordinary poor lorry driver, now he's a very wealthy man" (181). She reminds Debbie that war is not only *incidentally* profitable, but that some at the top may have escalated events precisely for its lucrative results. Go up the corridors of power far enough, she infers, and one may find no sign of the devastating war being waged on the ground. Certain political and economic shifts, intended to preserve imperialism under a new guise, are accelerated by the war: something Mrs Maduko treats as a known given. Women, *Destination* implies, have already been managing the material changes wrought by the same extractive colonial economy for decades. Rarely openly stated by the male characters, the issue of control over natural resources, a key driver of the war, is women's common knowledge.

The novel's hopes for one multi-ethnic nation, embodied in its half Itsekiri, half Igbo protagonist, is clear - although it bears examining, as Matthew Lecznar points out, how Emecheta suggests Debbie sometimes performs "the fissures between [her] personal, cultural and national identities" strategically (Lecznar, 2017: 120). Her protagonist's mixed ethnicity nonetheless co-exists with the novel's uncertainties about the nation-state form, particularly where the latter is styled and imposed by a departing colonial power. That "Emecheta realizes that foreign and unmodified forms of government, when imposed on a colonized nation, will necessarily serve in the interests of colonial powers"



(Adams, 2001: 291) is suggested by the fact that the author not only affirms through her female characters that Nigerian independence never meant economic autonomy, but also illustrates how and why Nigerian male leaders fail to question the forms of government selected, to an extent, for them. Personal levels of competence, political consciousness, and larger power structures are held up to scrutiny in order both to highlight these leaders' ego-fuelled mistakes, and to suggest that entrenched colonial legacies are beyond the control of any one man.

From the character of Saka Momoh, the leader of the Nigerian forces who is "hysterical" (Emecheta, 1982/1994: 109) with rage when challenged, to Chijioke Abosi, the leader of the Biafran Army who is "a black white man" (245), male leaders in *Destination* evidence the legacy of a British colonial education system that trained a certain class of male colonial subjects at, and according to the imperatives of, the colonial metropole. Although Emecheta includes a disclaimer to *Destination* saying her characters and their conversations are fictional, parallels with historical facts are discernible. The ruler of Nigeria during the Civil War, General Yakubu Gowon, was Sandhurst trained; the leader of Biafra, C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, was a graduate of Lincoln College, Oxford. The backgrounds of Civil War-era leaders in *Destination* suggest those of their real-life counterparts — backgrounds that have rendered some, like Abosi, "black white" men (245). Meanwhile, exclusion from this pedigree, as in the case of Momoh, seems to render him hyper-sensitive to any real or imagined condescension. Nigerian-Biafran leadership is therefore represented as a problem of colonial education as a structure that, amongst other things, has shaped these men's subjectivities. *Destination's* critique of male leadership overlays the strategic and personal, getting to the heart of one of the known failures of independence — that of the lack of "national consciousness" (Fanon, 1961/2001) amongst much of those relatively privileged segments of colonial societies who came to power without much, if any, participation in grassroots anti-colonial struggles.

This causal link is again communicated via the observations of female characters, then confirmed by omniscient narration. Elina Eze understands long before her husband Dr Eze's arrest at the end of the war that colonial structures (and their internalization) have combined with petty score-settling to produce a fatal situation. "Pity at the short-sightedness of her husband and his sex came over Elina. How could grown men make such blunders, and yet elevate themselves with such arrogance that one could not reach them to tell them the truth?" she wonders (Emecheta, 1982/1994: 240). As Dr Eze later collapses in fear, surrounded by Nigerian army soldiers, "he remembers his wife's voice saying, mere hours ago, 'Was not the oil the reason for all this mess in the first place?' All women were witches — how did she know?" (241) Indeed, that its male characters arrive belatedly at what is either thought or said by *Destination's* women even colours the tone of the novel's omniscient narrator, suggesting this may be Emecheta's own voice. We are told that Brigadier Onyemere, one of the instigators of the first coup, "did not know what he had let himself in for. He thought that by praising the spirit of nationalism he would abolish tribalism, blunt the sharpness of imported religion" (69). The knowing tone of the narrator suggests Onyemere's belief - that the mere "spirit of nationalism" will resolve the complex metaphysical and material legacies of colonialism in Nigeria (such as "imported religion" and "tribalism") — is obviously out of touch. The



voice here echoes the mix of criticism and pity in Elina's subjective perspective; both underline lack of foresight (Onyemere "did not know"; Dr Eze was "shortsighted") and self-aggrandizement ("his false belief"/"such arrogance").

In addition to this attention to women's subjective observations is *Destination's* use of the testimony form. Testimonies in the novel are held up as reliable narrativizations of unverifiable events; often foregrounding the subjective experiences of women and children, they are accepted as truth by group consensus. Interiority is thus situated as a component of the material, as scenes that centre testimonies of localized violence are simultaneously scenes of re-integration into community. For example, when reports of the first killings of Igbos in 1966 reach Colonel Abosi through witnesses, Emecheta singles out the testimonies of a young mother and a teenage boy. Opting to describe the pogroms in Northern Nigeria that killed an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 Igbo (Heerten and Moses, 2014: 173) through character points of view, without interruption and in full, sets aside the omniscient third-person voice that Emecheta frequently uses when relating the major political turning points of war. Instead, subjective testimonies provide us with our only impression of these bloody historical events that contributed to the declaration of secession.

One boy of about fifteen, who had long taken leave of his senses, rushed up to Ugoji and started to blubber, with saliva dripping from both corners of his mouth, "My mother, my father [ ... ] we were made to watch while they pounded them like yam with their clubs" [ ... ] One of his brothers came and pulled him away, apologising and saying to Ugoji, "He has been like this since the night of the incident." Ugoji simply gaped. (1982/1994: 84)

Emecheta's choosing to deliver this information via re-lived experience (testimony and dialogue) staggers the forward thrust of the narrative with its startlingly violent imagery and fragmented sentences. It also gives this traumatized boy historical authority, as he becomes the reader's source of information on the events of June through October 1966. Another harrowing testimony, from a young woman, paints its lived experience:

My husband was a chemist and we owned our own shop. As he was locking up, I heard the heavy footsteps of soldiers [ ... ] Our neighbours heard him calling for God's help, calling for his mother and me, but none of us could help. We all heard the firing, and I disobeyed him and ran out [ ... ] I was alone in the dirty muddy street where his bullet-ridden body, still warm, was left. (1982/1994: 91)

Details like the "body, still warm" and the "heavy footsteps" render this young woman's public testimony an act of both memory and creative narration; her adjectives describe the sensual experience of it. The affect this creates not only makes "all the women present begin to cry" in an act of collective empathy — which reassures the survivor of her safe refuge — but also "stirs the anger of those listening to fever point", galvanizing group political commitment (1982/1994: 91). The reaction of collective sorrow and anger suggests that all present have heard similar stories, and perhaps even survived the same. The young woman's unverifiable history is therefore accepted as true not because those listening have witnessed it firsthand, but because they reach a consensus on the truth value of the survivor's subjective recall.

This dual representational approach — omniscient narrator and partial points of view — establishes gendered narrative perspectives as historically authoritative sources of knowledge. It is helpful to think of this in terms of narrative spatialization: as that which, in Madhu Krishnan's definition, "draws on multiple scales and registers of social space [and] emphasises their interconnectedness as elements of a single, asymmetrically loaded system" (2018: 12). Emecheta uses this to situate the war as a neocolonial war: a violent process of incorporating any economically vital outliers — like the secessionist Eastern Nigeria — into the "single, asymmetrically loaded system" of capitalism in its neoimperial form. Pivoting between omniscient narration and women's points of view confers women's lived experiences historiographical value. These spatializing moves place women where they really were throughout the war: at the war front, because "the war front was everywhere in Eastern Nigeria" (Nnaemeka, 1997: 238). Although the war did not officially put female combatants on the frontline, the famine, air raids, refugeedom, and violence women had to survive are widely understood as war tactics. *Destination's* turn to women for the knowledge these circumstances impart is a historiographical intervention not because it presents these women's perspectives as useful addenda, but because it centres women throughout its narration of the war *in toto*: that is, of the war's lived effects as well as its structural causes.

### **"Go back to being yourself now"**

Having thus centred Nigerian women in its narrativization of the Civil War, *Destination* then considers how they resist the war's detrimental effects, transform their environments, or exercise their agency in situations of conflict. Christie Achebe's detailed study of Igbo women in the Civil War reveals a variety of roles, all of which can be considered active involvement (Achebe, 2010: 805). In *Destination*, such active involvement takes various forms according to shifts in women's material circumstances. Emecheta chooses to focus particularly on how women resist and/or manage the physical and psychic consequences of sexual violence and displacement, which were as commonplace as food shortages throughout the war. She does so via implying a certain social power to the symbolization of motherhood and the maternal, in senses including and beyond the biological. This is especially prevalent throughout the second half of the novel in those scenes that weaponize (to deliberately use a term of combat) familial relations like mother, sister, and son, using them in moments where war conditions threaten to dehumanize women. This serves in many instances to remind male soldiers (or shame them into remembering) that certain fundamental sociocultural codes are violated at great spiritual risk.

*Destination's* treatment of the maternal as a socially powerful symbol recalls Elleke Boehmer's observation of how Emecheta uses the symbolic — she singles out "significant metaphors or defining images" — in a manner interwoven with the "day-to-day" of material reality (2005: 115). This is evident also in the novel's gesturing towards the *longue durée* of gender relations in some parts of precolonial and colonial West Africa. Across Igbo, Yoruba, Fon, Lupe, and Edo cultures, instances of women's authority over men exist, especially within cosmologies that conceive of the world as made up of a physical and a spiritual/ancestral half, which have their respective modes of authority

and social structures (Achebe et al., 2018: n.p). Although Emecheta never explicitly refers to these cosmologies, what we do know from the text is that characters are aware of a precolonial history that had, in some contexts, greater gender parity. An example is the moment where Mr Teteku, a family friend, seeks to reassure Debbie, who is concerned for her mother's safety:

"But not a woman, we don't treat women like that."

Babs and Debbie laughed almost involuntarily and Teteku suspected he knew the reason. In the distant past in that part of Africa women were treated almost as men's equals, but with the arrival of colonialism their frail claim to equality had been taken away. (1982/1994: 113)

This collectively known (albeit deemed "taken away") authority seems to manifest within several scenes in the novel wherein vulnerable women wrest some measure of power away from their wartime oppressors by positioning themselves as (grand)mothers. When Nigerian soldiers stop a convoy of Igbo refugees and order the women to wait naked by the roadside, Mrs Maduko reminds the young soldiers of certain inviolable social interdependencies, such as that of child upon mother:

One bold old woman went to the heap of clothes and took a lappa in which to wrap herself.

"What the hell are you doing? Stop or I'll shoot," a soldier said savagely.

"Cover my nakedness, my son. The night is cold and this mother of yours is shivering," she explained, as patiently as one would to a mentally sick child.

The eager soldier thus addressed by her grumbled incoherently and looked away. The other women followed the old lady's example and hastily covered themselves. (1982/1994: 164)

Speaking to the soldier "as though to a mentally sick child", Mrs Maduko shames him out of his bloodlust. The effectiveness of this move - it frequently minimizes the threat of violence — suggests there still exists a certain social power to it. Emecheta has previously suggested (as in the exchange between Debbie, Babs and, Mr Teteku) that this social power has a history, even if half-remembered. Not only do Mrs Maduko's actions gain her agency in a situation of mortal danger, they assert a subjectivity at once ancestral mother and immediate relative ("this mother of *yours*") under conditions intended to dehumanize her. Her words also shield her younger female companions. This stand-off between the female refugees and soldiers momentarily exposes the Civil War's construction of victims and perpetrators out of mothers and sons.

Debbie, whose social class, sexual freedom, and Oxford education have thus far suggested her distance from motherhood, soon catches on to its social meaning. She manipulates the maternal into an emotive symbol in order to soften a tense exchange with a male stranger, securing herself safe passage eastwards:

"I am to go to my mother," she lied [ ... ] "My mother is the only person I have [ ... ] I am going to make sure she is alright. See?" She ended on an apologetic note.

The man's strained eyes rested perfunctorily on her and quickly looked away. He heaved a sigh and murmured, "Ah, our mothers. Mine is very old [ ... ] I want to be by her side". (1982/1994: 156)

Motherhood here functions more as a reminder of social interdependencies than necessarily as a reference to particular people, as Debbie (untruthfully) invokes her mother as the reason for her journey. The man who had attempted to waylay her then indicates his desire for psychic normalcy through reference to his mother. Both socialize the meaning of motherhood, turning it into a powerful proxy for what neither of them outwardly expresses: their desire for safe passage, for the war to end, and for a return to the ordinary everyday.

Even the novel's seemingly most passive mother, the one-time privileged Stella Ogedemgbe, steps into performing an authoritative form of motherhood when she must safeguard Debbie's wellbeing. Transforming from hapless trophy wife to pillar of strength after her daughter's rape, we are told "[Stella] had nursed, talked, prayed, then bullied, telling her daughter to put it all behind her, that she could still lead a perfectly normal life — this from a woman who for years had pretended to be so frail and dependent that tying her own headscarf was a big task. All that show of dependence just to feed her husband's ego" (Emecheta, 1982/1994: 150). Survival in gendered and neocolonial circumstances has had to take many forms for women, even under relatively comfortable class circumstances like those of Stella's.

The authority that *Destination*'s women exercise in moments of danger through an invocation of (grand)motherhood is also something that can be considered via the context Christie Achebe (2010) provides on control mechanisms in the traumatic circumstances of the Nigerian Civil War. Drawing from literature on the psychology of control (that is, an individual's actual or perceived ability to influence their situation, for their own survival), Achebe highlights women's forms of secondary control over Civil War conditions, which consist of "attempts to accommodate to objective conditions in order to affect a more satisfying fit with those conditions and control their psychological impact" (2010: 789). These secondary control mechanisms involve building social frameworks within which the detrimental effects of violent conditions can be managed; an example Achebe provides from the historical record is that of some women opening their homes during wartime to the education of children in the community (2010: 799).

*Destination* demands recognition of such secondary control mechanisms, as the majority of the work of building social frameworks or managing the collective psychic burdens of wartime fell on women. This, too, is one of the social functions attached to the invoking of motherhood in the novel. When Debbie and her fellow refugees pass through an Igbo village that has been attacked, Mrs Maduko stirs all into action by reminding the women that their pain as mothers is shared and understood by all present. This small reassurance must be clung to at that moment in time for everyone's immediate physical and psychic survival. Mrs Maduko, we are told,

listened sympathetically, then said with little preamble, "Our men were useful, yes, very useful; but they have now been killed by other men [ ... ] In the process of letting your husband provide for you, you have become dumb and passive. Go back to being yourself now. Get up, women, and let us bury the son of another sad woman". (1982/1994: 203–204)

She reminds the grieving mothers that survival does not mean acceptance of conditions; rather, those who have become “dumb and passive” must take on the responsibility of being vocal and active in order for interdependency to work. Remembering the shared fact of their trauma is not a solution in itself to the gendered violence of neocolonial warfare, but it keeps a total sense of isolation and loss of agency at bay until conditions change.

It is important to note that images and metaphors of motherhood can frequently run the risk of biological essentialism. However, in the case of *Destination*, it is also clear that these images are dissociated from the ideology of bourgeois domesticity, and to an extent even biological childbirth. Although most Emecheta scholars agree that she found “feminist” a Eurocentric label, insufficient for addressing the specific problems facing women in Africa and the diasporas, Onookome Okome points out that Emecheta *did* identify with Womanism (2017: 405), and that her treatment of motherhood correlates with several African feminisms — particularly Motherism, which carries meanings beyond biological motherhood.<sup>4</sup> This is supported by Emecheta’s overall output. Susan Z. Andrade has drawn attention to how, for instance, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) gives its protagonist what Flora Nwapa’s title character in *Efuru* (1966) wishes for desperately, children — but many times over, to the point of misery. There, “Emecheta interrogates Efuru’s ‘tragic flaw’ by shifting responsibility for conception to the man”, as well as “draws attention to the ironic status of the ‘barren’ Efuru as the ‘mother’ text of (anglophone) African women’s literature” (Andrade, 2011: 62). There is a refusal in Emecheta’s work to define motherhood solely in terms of filiation. Several of Emecheta’s African American contemporaries have similarly socialized the narrative representation of motherhood, with writers like Toni Morrison adopting it to construct complex tropes of collective freedom and historical justice (Cobb-Moore and Billingsley, 2017). Women in *Destination* claim social agency and respect by declaring themselves “mother” to many “children”, as Mrs Maduko does to disarm the soldiers.

The methods of resistance to, and the management of, material and psychic suffering results not only in the above modes of female agency over war historiography and their own bodies, but also in the breakdown of some class barriers. Living amongst the refugee women and orphans with whom she travelled eastwards, Debbie finds herself emplaced within a network of mutual responsibility. This responsibility is one wherein her mental resilience is demanded by and for others, and which in turn helps sustain it for herself. She and the refugee women have established an understanding that has eased the gulf between their class backgrounds, despite the group’s initial distrust of Debbie’s Anglicized ways. That said, Emecheta is not naïve about the class barriers that remain. For one, Debbie stands out in her inability to complete practical work: “she walked down that dry road in the heat, with the weight of the child almost breaking her back. It struck her that African women her age carried babies like this all day and still farmed and cooked. What kind of African woman was she, indeed?” (Emecheta, 1982/1994: 181)

Nonetheless, the novel still chooses to treat its imperfect protagonist’s new consciousness as significant. Debbie, who understood the neocolonial crony capitalism she was born into but not quite the systematized gendered oppression it operated through, now sees that the latter crucially includes the socioeconomic separation of African women. This siloing prevents organizing, and the development of the kind of

political consciousness she herself acquired throughout her journey to Eastern Nigeria. Deciding that “her mind was made up. No man, not even Abosi, was going to make a fool of her, a fool of all those unfortunate mothers who had lost their sons” (Emecheta 1982/1994: 244), Debbie then rejects Alan Grey’s offer to take her to England. She instead stays in Nigeria so as to “tell those orphans the story of how a few ambitious soldiers from Sandhurst tried to make their dream a reality” (245). Her refusal to leave is at once a commitment to use her class privilege to do historiographical work (“tell the story”) as well as a reminder of the struggle that remains — that against the neocolonial order in Nigeria, whatever side emerges the victor. Her collapsing the men on both sides to “soldiers from Sandhurst” leaves us with the spectre of British imperialism.

Given this, Debbie’s rejection of this one man in particular cannot be read as the novel advocating that heterosexual female singledom, and the personal independence that implies in white feminist discourses, is desirable above all. Florence Stratton rightly criticizes that “the prevailing trend in feminist criticism of African women’s writing has been to adopt a Western feminist perspective” (1994: 109), which can fail to account for the full political significance of Emecheta’s protagonist’s decision. What Debbie says to Alan is an explicit re-alignment with others: “I am not ready to become the wife of an exploiter of my nation” (258). The interdependency she has learned makes it possible for Debbie to go from her newly acquired political consciousness to solidarity. This, in Barbara Harlow’s conception of testimony and struggle, indicates in positive terms an unapologetic arrival at partisanship, or of owning “the active contribution that her narrative makes to the struggle” (1996: 73). From someone who emphasized her “neutral” ethnicity, Debbie grows into a committed participant who understands she could put the privilege of her literacy into the service of others. The novel leads us to believe she may “tell the story” through a completely different kind of historiographical practice, too: one that recounts the war in its totality via the lived experiences of women.

## Coda

As Emecheta’s legacy is deemed to have “created a path of inspiration for contemporary Nigerian women writers” (Nadaswaran, 2012: 146), analyses of her novels have often chosen to focus on their various representations of Nigerian women. I have sought to add to these important considerations of characterization the historiographical implications of *Destination’s* choosing to retell various aspects of the Nigerian Civil War — its neo-colonial resource scramble, its problems of male leadership — through the points of view of diverse women, all of whom go on to survive the war’s psychic and material violence. This makes the novel reach towards broader claims related to the gendered politics of historiography. These gendered politics are not necessarily always addressed through the incorporation of a “female perspective” into war narratives, especially if that incorporation does not question why war’s local, interpersonal, emotional, sexual, or subjective effects are often designated as the particular domain of women’s war narratives. Relatedly, even such incorporation does not necessarily question why histories that lack them are still considered whole or authoritative regardless.

Marion Pape has drawn attention to how, if a female author claimed her right to war memories, she broke several taboos, as she “not only contravened decency and morals



by invading the male terrain of war and the male body and its language [but] also entered a political terrain forbidden to women” (2005: 232). However, I have throughout refrained from labelling Emecheta’s as “feminine discourse, a counter-discourse” (2005: 232). The essentialism of the notion of “a feminine discourse” aside, the tendency to posit diverse African women’s experiences as silences now uncovered by scholarship, to then hold them up as valuable only in their countering a hegemonic (patriarchal, imperialist) discourse, not only assumes what was not heard by historians (the intelligensias of the Global North or South) was silent, but assigns one purpose to diverse narratives by women of equally diverse politics and positionalities. *Destination* suggests no such flattening where it easily could have. Its third-person omniscient narrator, for example, could be Emecheta herself, privileged in her diasporic remove from the Civil War, yet suffering racism in 1970s Britain. Her protagonist Debbie, who survives sexual violence, also oversees the torture of Igbo soldiers as an officer in the Nigerian army. The most powerless, like the young refugee who witnesses her husband’s murder, gives testimony that quickens Colonel Abosi’s political decision to secede. These and more examples point to the fact that women’s experiences in this novel are neither silently awaiting “discovery”, nor uniformly confronting a single hegemonic structure.

In that sense, it is important to think through women’s writing on the Nigerian Civil War, *Destination* among them, as having a politics of their own: a politics that may exist in addition to or beyond one interested in countering state-sanctioned narratives with civilian experiences. To put it differently, if women’s war historiography is measured according to its supplemental value (such as its providing a snapshot of the “home front”), then this leaves historiographical practice, with its gendered politics, unchanged. The value of women’s war historiography would then remain measured by whether or not it succeeds in “reaching men” in order “to tell [men] the truth of their blunders”, in the words of the character of Elina Eze (Emecheta 1982/1994: 24). *Destination* attempts a more transformative move as it seeks a way to think war historiography anew: a way that centres the lived experiences of women as its sources, and measures its own success by whether or not it manages to preserve and pass on women’s knowledges of resilience and resistance. What Elina wants, after all, is to “live to see her children settled in life, and tell her grandchildren the story of Biafra” (240).

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## Notes

1. I use the too-broad term “African women” here as I am paraphrasing Emecheta’s own words (1988: 179). However, given the problematic generalization this makes about a religiously, socio-economically, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse array of women’s



and femmes' experiences across the African continent, I have been more specific (e.g. "Igbo women") in contexts where this is possible.

2. Subsequent references are to this 1994 edition of *Destination Biafra* (1982) and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
3. See also Nwangwu et al. (2020) for a study of post-war Igbo nationalism.
4. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi offers the qualifier that the "recognition of the impact of racism, neocolonialism, nationalism, economic instability and psychological disorientation on black lives [...] makes concern about sexism merely one aspect of Womanism" (1985: 65). Motherism is a multidimensional theory that involves the dynamics of ordering, reordering, creating structures, building, and rebuilding in cooperation with mother nature at all levels of human endeavour (Acholonu, 1995).

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